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Gaithersburg West and White Flint: A Tale of Two Cities

Ask North Bethesda residents about the proposed White Flint Sector Plan and they will say the plan was done with them. Ask Gaithersburg, North Potomac, and Rockville residents about the Gaithersburg West Plan, and they will say the plan is being done to them. In White Flint, there was a meeting of the minds; in Gaithersburg West, there were just meetings.

Major property owners and community residents were partners in the White Flint Sector Plan, a transit-oriented development around a Metro station. The vision for White Flint includes an attractive urban center with plazas, a street grid, and excellent pedestrian and bicycle connections to neighboring communities. The Sierra Club, the Action Committee for Transit, the Coalition for Smarter Growth, business owners, and many civic groups support it.

In contrast, the massive development proposed in the draft Gaithersburg West Master Plan, which borders Rockville, Gaithersburg and North Potomac, and includes the Life Sciences Center, is intensely opposed by surrounding communities. Gaithersburg West has no Metro, yet would have the square footage of four-and-a-half Pentagons, equal to downtown Bethesda and NIH combined. Its 600 acres would be a larger employment center than the entire City of Gaithersburg or Route 29 corridor. Gaithersburg West depends on the Corridor Cities Transitway, which hasn't been approved, much less funded, and will never have Metrorail's capacity or ridership.

The draft plan proposes upzoning the historic 107-acre Belward Farm, owned by Johns Hopkins, from 1.2 million square feet of buildable space to 4.6 million square feet, equivalent to 23 Wal-Mart Supercenters. This would be a windfall for Hopkins, which purchased the farm for \$5 million from Elizabeth Banks, who wanted to protect the farm from overdevelopment.

Everyone supports the draft plan's continued focus on life sciences and health care, as well as the 38,000 jobs already planned for the area. However, most residents strongly oppose the proposal to increase job capacity to 60,000 while weakening congestion standards in a traffic-laden area. They are appalled that average traffic speeds are projected to drop to 9 mph during rush hour.

Residents and commuters, Gaithersburg and Rockville elected officials, and the state's transportation department have told the County Council that the draft plan's huge increase in peak hour trips, about 21,000, would cause severe congestion on local roads and I-270. The draft plan has inadequate requirements to ensure that transportation capacity keeps pace with development. Additionally, the draft plan has far more jobs than housing for its workforce, and lacks adequate connections with existing communities and environmental sustainability measures.

The draft plan balances on paper because it increases "acceptable" congestion from 1,450 cars per lane per hour to 1,600 in the Life Sciences Center. This hides rather than solves a problem. Incredibly, the plan assumes that 10 percent of workers will be passengers in a carpool, although the county's average is 2.3 percent.

Unlike White Flint, the proposed Gaithersburg West Plan is strongly opposed by the Sierra Club, Action Committee for Transit, Coalition for Smarter Growth, and numerous civic groups. Gaithersburg and Rockville elected officials have unanimously sent several letters calling on the County Council to revise the plan to adequately address the traffic impact.

City officials and tens of thousands of residents and commuters are counting on the County Council to protect their interests. The council should send the draft plan back to the Planning Board with guidance for addressing its serious, interrelated problems.

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